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Soviet Agents Busy on Hill But Threat Is Hard to Assess

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Every couple of months, Rep. Guy Vander Jagt (R-Mich.) gets a visit from Boris Davydov, a Soviet Embassy official he has known for more than eight years. They usually go around the corner from a House office building to the Republican Party-run Capitol Hill Club, where the congressman buys Davydov a drink, introduces him to other legislators and engages him in lively debate about foreign policy and other issues.

"I always thoroughly enjoy our conversations," Vander Jagt said. "He holds nothing back."

But Vander Jagt, who was the keynote speaker at the 1980 Republican National Convention, does hold something back. The day after such an encounter, Vander Jagt calls the FBI, which dispatches a counterintelligence agent to find out what Davydov wanted to discuss. U.S. intelligence files identify Davydov as an agent for the KGB, the Soviet secret intelligence service.

All over Capitol Hill, Soviet Embassy officials are collecting documents, attending hearings, talking to members of Congress and cultivating committee staff workers—all as part of an intense but rarely publicized effort to gather intelligence. Several dozen of these Soviet diplomats and embassy employees are identified in U.S. intelligence files as agents for the KGB and the GRU, the Soviet military intelligence agency.

Several congressional staff members said in interviews that they often discuss military and foreign policy with the Soviet officials, and provide them with government reports and hearing transcripts that are available to any member of the public. Others say that they refuse to talk to the Soviets or to give them press releases, and that they immediately report any attempted contact to the FBI.

The Justice Department estimates there are about 200 Soviet and Soviet-bloc intelligence agents in the nation's capital. Theodore M. Gardner, the FBI's special agent in charge of the Washington field office, said in an interview that their No. 1 target is Congress, which draws more of the KGB's resources than either the White House or the Pentagon.

With more than 18,000 staff workers, hordes of lobbyists and reporters, a constant parade of expert witnesses, reams of government documents and a porous political fabric through which most of this information invariably leaks, the Hill is a rich source for intelligence operatives on the inner workings of Washington.

While other foreign diplomats, including the British, the Israelis and the Japanese, actively engage in congressional relations on the Hill, the KGB presence there is a matter of particular concern to U.S. counterintelligence. It is not at all clear what value the Soviets place on it or exactly what they are able to get from the information gathered there.

There has been no recent public disclosure of security leaks to the KGB from the Hill, yet some legislators say the open and loose atmosphere makes it easy for the Soviets to collect a wealth of political and foreign policy information that emerges in legislative hearings and documents.

The Soviets keep a record of every person they approach in Congress and make careful assessments of how each one can be useful, the FBI's Gardner said. He said these agents are continually trying to evaluate political strategy, discover what top policymakers think, collect technical information, gain entree to well-placed officials and, ultimately, to recruit people to turn over classified information and documents.

"We believe this is their major thrust—the collection of political intelligence," Gardner said. Many congressional staff workers, he said,

"become these logical believers not apparent to the work."

Some legislators, however, remain deeply skeptical of these charges of increased Soviet spying, saying the Reagan administration has greatly exaggerated the threat for political reasons. Some also note that foreign access to Capitol Hill actually may convince these agents that there is no great conspiracy against the Soviet Union. Other members are lining up behind legislation pending in both the House and Senate that would require all representatives of communist countries to register with the attorney general each time they want to visit anyone in Congress.

The FBI is keeping careful track of the Soviet diplomats who spend day after day on the Hill. FBI agents are authorized to conduct physical surveillance of Soviet agents, even to the point of following them through the halls of Congress.

Vander Jagt, for example, said the FBI has been interested in his meetings with Davydov since he first met the Soviet diplomat more than eight years ago at a former congressman's dinner party.

"He gives me the impression that he's just coming to see me as a friend," said Vander Jagt, who serves on the House Ways and Means Committee. "I may be a dupe, but I really believe a friendship has developed. It's like a lobbyist—you hit a spark with one another and a friendship grows."

"Maybe he's incredibly skillful. I never have the impression that he's looking for something. He's very interested in our political situation, how many seats we're going to gain and so forth. He figures it doesn't hurt to send his cables back to Moscow and say he met with me."

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